

States of the Union

THE TWO FACES OF POPULISM

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



WALT WHITMAN

THE OAK-PANELLED hearing room seems rather too fancy for the topic to be discussed, and rather too large for the scattering of Washington reporters present. They have come to hear about the Populist Caucus that Representative Tom Harkin and 13 Democratic colleagues in the House are getting ready to launch.

In the handout being passed around, Caucus members are listed Populist-style, first names are short and folksy

The roster includes Tom Daschle from South Dakota, Al Gore from Tennessee, Jim Oberstar and Tim Penny from Minnesota, Bill Richardson from New Mexico, Bob Wise from West Virginia, and Bill Weaver from Oregon. Their ideals are as old-fashioned and straightforward as their constituents, both products of America's farms and hamlets.

Weaver's name rings ancient Populist bells. His grandfather, General James Baird Weaver, ran for President on the Populist Party ticket in 1892, polling more than a million ballots and collecting 22 electoral votes. As things turned out, his effort represented the party's most hopeful moment, the closest it ever came to winning power nationwide.

Now Tom Harkin, a lean Iowan with an urbane manner, strides to the podium. The new populism, he declares, can serve as an alternative to the old liberalism. "The current debate between liberals and conservatives misses a fundamental point," he tells us. "There has been a steady erosion of the basic foundations of our economic system, which has only been accelerated under the Reagan Administration with its pro-big business policies and wealthy bias at the expense of small businesses and common Americans."

The new Caucus intends "to set the agenda for debate on our nation's political and economic life for the next decade." Energy costs, taxation, interest rates, and agriculture will be main agenda items. Our free enterprise system, Harkin says, is based on the idea "that initiative should be rewarded and that we all should pay our fair share of taxes. What we find now is that too often it is wealth and power which soak up those rewards and that many people and giant corporations don't pay taxes at all. The rich get richer, the big get bigger and the rest of the economy withers on the vine."

It is a venerable message, though it has gone largely unheeded. "Grave and important issues confront us," the Texan Evan Jones warned a Farmers Alliance group in 1888. "Unjust combinations seek to throttle our lawful and legitimate efforts to introduce a business system." Populist theology seeks restoration of a Jeffersonian Eden spoiled by greed, rather than invented, paradise need only be rescued.

Harkin now calls for questions. A gray-haired reporter wearing sunglasses and holding a pocket tape recorder stands up in the front row. Speaking into the recorder, he asks why Harkin once voted for the oil depletion allowance. The questioner pushes his tape toward Harkin, but Harkin demurs, saying only that in voting for omnibus tax bills, Congressmen are sometimes compelled to accept the bad along with the good.

But the reporter is not finished. Still addressing the tape, he delivers a brief sermon on the meaning of populism. The Caucus members, he concludes, are "just liberals trying to repackage their failed policies with a new label."

Who is this smoked-glass interrogator? At first he refuses to identify himself, later he admits to being John Lawson, a columnist for the *Washington Times*, the Moonies' publishing effort in the capital. Lawson also works for Richard A. Viguere, the far-Right fundraiser and publisher of *Conservative Digest*. What reporters have just witnessed is a struggle for Populist turf between the extreme Right and the mod-

erate Left, a clash of claims over a lode that many assumed had been played out generations ago

Months earlier, the *Conservative Digest* devoted an entire issue to promoting the proposition that neoconservative populism was sweeping the country, with Ronald Reagan leading the stampede. Now, in a release timed to compete with Harkin's press conference, Viguerie has struck again. The Populist Caucus favors mandatory school busing and higher gasoline taxes, he says, and neither represents the positions "of a true populist." According to Viguerie, a true populist "is for less government interference in our daily lives, not more."

The battle for America's populist conscience has thus been joined along familiar lines. The enemy is seen as big business or as big government, depending upon the ideology one chooses to embrace. Either way, the solutions are similar: more freedom, more individualism, more private initiative.

What are we to make of this interesting dispute—part philosophical, part semantic—and how should we respond? To begin with, we ought to concede the point that in confronting the world, populism has too often been Janus-faced. If one face has looked tolerantly outward, savoring pluralism and welcoming the motley oppressed, the other has stared meanly inward, rejecting all but those carrying impeccable nativist credentials. Theories of conspiracy invariably breed suspicion, and even at its best populism has tended to rely on the notion that somewhere, somehow, someone is messing with The People. Mary Elizabeth Lease, that eloquent Kansas Populist, liked to describe Grover Cleveland as "an agent of Jewish bankers and British gold." The Georgian Populist Thomas E. Watson got elected to Congress on a platform that slandered blacks, Indians and, above all, newcomers. "The scum of creation has been dumped on us," he declared. "The most dangerous and corrupting hordes of an Old World have invaded us."

More than anything else, it was bigotry that doomed the movement, pre-

venting rural WASPs in the West and South from linking arms with urban immigrants in the East. In the 1896 election, William Jennings Bryan lost every northern industrial state, the workers preferring McKinley's air of benevolence to the Democrats' air of parochialism.

The Viguerie brand of populism thus seems as genuine as it is regrettable. It is hardly an accident that he deploras compulsory school busing or that he sees it as a critical populist issue. In Viguerie's two right hands, populism becomes a blank check made out to the nation's know-nothings.

Harkin's version, on the other hand, appears headed in the right direction, presenting us with a vision of America that is broad and open-hearted rather than narrow and exclusionary. "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you," said Whitman—a pretty good motto for the sunny side of populism.

IF AT TIMES the "new" populism seems more reminiscent of Norman Rockwell than of Norman Thomas, we can take comfort in the observation that it is in the American grain and therefore within the easy comprehension of ordinary citizens. American socialism, for all its utopian notions and historic resonances, remains largely outside the American imagination. It never appealed to the nation's farmers and shopkeepers, who preferred cottage capitalism, and among the city proletariat it is as dead today as Whiggery.

There is reason to believe, moreover, that a Populist coalition made up of urban workers and rural proprietors is, at last, not so wild a dream. Neither bigotry nor bigness are what they used to be. In the West, television and the automobile have freed village residents of the curse of insularity, and in some measure of the accompanying curse of ethnic animus. What the Bill of Rights began, Dan Rather has taken a step or two further.

In the South, history and the Voting Rights Act have narrowed the options of racist demagogues, at times steering them in surprising directions. Reformed ranters like George Wallace of Ala-

bama have dusted off the old Populist dream of a black-white electoral partnership capable of challenging cotton barons and mill owners. If Tom Watson were alive today, he would be an integrationist.

Urban whites in the North, meanwhile, persist in their racist ways—e.g. Chicago. Yet they, too, seem peculiarly ripe nowadays for populist picking. Reaganomics and 50 per cent unemployment rates in inner-city ghettos have lent a special pertinence to the Populist Caucus' call for "a fair shake." Whatever the claim of Viguerie, populism has never required government to vanish entirely from the arena, only to maintain justice and keep the serpents out of Eden. A Populist Caucus approach that goes beyond individual initiative and takes the Federal role into stricter account could win more urban friends.

In addition, certain issues that once appeared chiefly rural—i.e. waste disposal, energy extraction and the location of MX missiles—have lately assumed an urban relevance. Such dilemmas, notes the historian Peter Clecak in his recent book, *The Quest*, "involve people in a democracy of danger. Under certain circumstances, large issues may come to seem personal, even local." One of populism's strengths has been its knack of making national riddles accessible to the light of personal analysis, and to the reforms of local politics. We could use more of that strength to help us deal sensibly with current miseries.

Finally, in welcoming Harkin and dismissing Viguerie, we should bear in mind that populism is essentially a performing art rather than a philosophical doctrine, and as such its pronouncements and behavior have been anything but consistent. As with the Bible, one can be finicky in citing populist history, selecting whatever promises to inspire and rejecting whatever threatens to embarrass. Even so, can more be said for any of the other *isms* that beckon to us from time to time?

Do I contradict myself?" asks Whitman. "Very well then I contradict myself / (I am large / I contain multitudes)."